

LIVING

NORTHEAST GEORGIA

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CELEBRATIONS
& FESTIVALS



BY PAMELA A. KEENE

Day Trip

From a wooden and cable platform perch, high above the forest floor, the view is breathtaking. But what's even more awesome is the ride from tree top to tree top on the **North Georgia Canopy Tours**, the state's newest adventure attraction. Safely harnessed in with plenty of trained guides to help, guests feel the wind on their faces as they zoom across the cables on what is quickly becoming one of the most popular destinations in Northeast Georgia.

"Zipping through the trees is truly an exhilarating experience," says Leah Watkins who, with her husband Kirk, owns North Georgia Canopy Tours, which opened in early April in Lula. "We're constantly amazed by the comments we get from guests who just can't seem to get enough of this high-flying adventure, even those who come saying they have a fear of heights."

Leah and Kirk began their journey to create North Georgia's only canopy tour when they purchased 34 forested acres on the North Oconee River in Lula in 2000. Their vision was to create an eco-tourism site that showcased the terrain and beautiful scenery on Old Mill Farm. They purchased additional pieces of land, built a log home on the property and began work on a zipline project.

Kirk built the first amateur zipline in

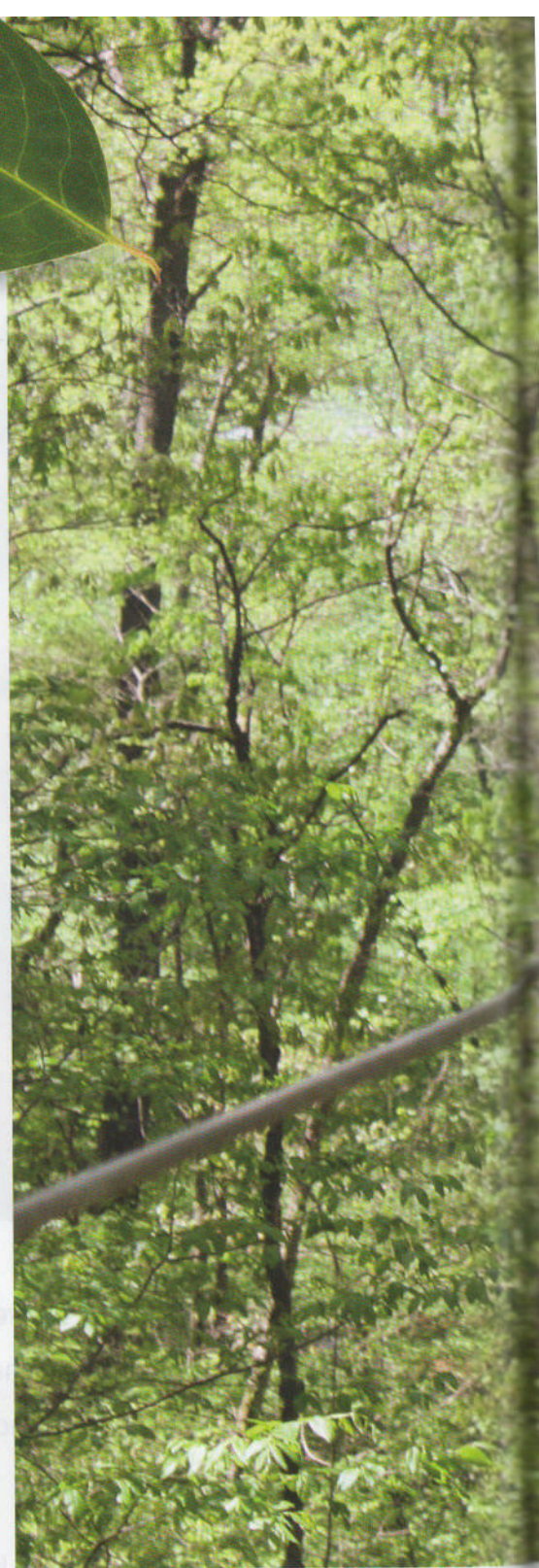
2001 with mixed reviews, but it wasn't until the couple and their two children vacationed in Costa Rica and took a professional canopy tour that the dream jelled for them. According to the story, both Kirk and Leah had a fear of heights, but they quickly traded their trepidation for an all-out adventure, one that they wanted to bring back home to Georgia and share with guests all year long.

"When we came home, we reached out to John Walker of BONZAI-Design for a preliminary course design," Leah says. "He had designed a similar course in Ohio and has the reputation for creating challenging, safe and ecologically-friendly canopy tours."

By this time, Kirk and Leah had amassed about 136 acres for their project. Walker and his staff came down, and, with a team of arborists developed a workable course design that maximized the natural attributes of the hardwood forest filled with decades-old poplars, white and red oak, hickory, maple and birch trees.

"One of our goals was to build the course with minimum impact on the forest and trees," Leah says. "John's method of building platforms, securing them to the tree tops and including other natural elements suited our mission to be ecologically responsible."

After carefully mapping out the course



and selecting trees that were suitable, construction began in late 2009. The first course, designed to be a two-hour experience, was completed in late March and training began for the 30-plus guides.

It includes nine ziplines, two suspension sky bridges and a couple of moderate hikes through the hardwood forest. There are also two zip crossings of the Oconee River and a ride over a pasture. The tour

Special Photos



ends with a dual zip across a pond.

The launch/landing platforms are attached with an engineered design of blocks and cables, with guy lines stretching to support locations on nearby trees and on the ground. The platforms are designed and installed to move and expand while remaining stable as the trees grow.

In late April, Leah and Kirk opened a second course, called the Adventure Tour,

with 12 ziplines. It splits off from the basic tour for additional zipline rides and other features, taking about three hours to complete the experience.

Located just an hour northeast of Atlanta off Ga. 365, North Georgia Canopy Tours is open seven days a week during daylight hours. Designed for anyone over the age of 10 with a minimum weight of 70 pounds, the

course offers tours at regular intervals. Guides lead groups of up to eight people through zips with names like "Flew the Coop" and "Snowflake."

Reservations are recommended. The cost is \$69 per person for the Skybridge Tour and \$89 per person for the Adventure Tour. For more information, visit www.northgeorgiacanopytours.com or call 770-869-7272. ♦